TRANSCRIPT—RITA BELIN NZINGA

Interviewee: Rita Belin Nzinga

Interviewer: Zoe Rhine

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Transcriber: Alice Helms

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Zoe Rhine: This is Zoe Rhine from Pack Memorial Library on September 1st for the Stephens-Lee reunion of the class of 1968. I'm talking with Rita. Your full name?

Rita Belin Nzinga: Rita Nzinga.

ZR: Does that include your maiden name?

RBN: My maiden name was Belin. B-E-L-I-N. That's my maiden name.

ZR: Could you tell me your parents' full names.

RBN: My mother's name was Louise and my father's name was Thomas.

ZR: What area of Asheville did you grow up in?

RBN: I grew up in East End.

ZR: Was your family involved in the Urban Renewal project?

RBN: No.

ZR: So your home that you grew up in is still there?

RBN: No.

ZR: So you started at Stephens-Lee in—.

RBN: Sixty-four, sixty-five. The last freshman class.

ZR: Can we just talk about that first year? Before that, where did you go to school?

RBN: Hill Street.

ZR: Your whole elementary?

RBN: No, one year.

ZR: Were there any teachers from your first year that you especially recall?

RBN: I was always fond of Mrs. Forney, Mr. Sherill, and Mrs. Hankins.

ZR: Can you tell me your feelings about being at Stephens-Lee?

RBN: Well, I think for me, I was a little traumatized. I don't think I realized that the school would be torn down for some years. And that the gym was the only thing remaining. ( ).

ZR: When you left with the last class of Stephens-Lee and went to South French Broad, did you feel like that was a new building, did you feel like you were better off there, with the conditions at Stephens-Lee kind of deteriorating?

RBN: No. It wasn't the building ( ). Stephens-Lee, even when I was a small kid I heard all my cousins and everybody talking about Stephens-Lee, so Stephens-Lee was actually my dream, just to get to Stephens-Lee.

ZR: Did your parents go to Stephens-Lee?

RBN: My mother did, yes.

ZR: Do you remember what class she graduated in?

RBN: I don't.

ZR: Do you think it might have been better if they had kept the name Stephens-Lee at South French Broad?

RBN: I don't think transferring the name would have done anything. It was a new building. It wouldn't have had the same vibe.

ZR: When you graduated in sixty-eight, it was an all-Black class?

RBN: Yes.

ZR: Did you have any connection to people a little younger to you that went to Asheville High School? Do you have anything to say about their experiences?

RBN: Well I can only say I hope it was a positive experience. When I was a sophomore I dated Jesse Adams, who was the first Black to attend Lee-Edwards. He was the first Black student to ( ).

ZR: Is he still around?

RBN: No, he passed away.

ZR: Any other thoughts you can share with us about your high school education?

RBN: I think, and I always thought, that we had the best teachers, what ever the class. Their experience was our experience ( ) passed down. They were all like family. Even the ones that I don't remember. I don't remember having a teacher that was a stranger.

ZR: The sense of community just amazes me when I hear stories.

RBN: And what they encouraged was quality, it just was that simple. Everybody wanted to go to Stephens-Lee.

ZR: It sounds like the faculty, the student body, the families of the students and the churches were all a part of one.

RBN: All connected. I played with the band for three years, the marching band. It was a wonderful experience, there was no Band Director like Doc Lennon. I am sure he is somewhere in heaven directing some horns right now.

ZR: When you transferred to South French Broad, I was surprised that a large amount of faculty did get reassigned there.

RBN: Where else would they want to send them? I guess segregation would not be the word they would want to use, but it was still segregated. So there was no place else for them to go.

ZR: And a lot of them did actually also make being reassigned to Asheville High. A lot of people retired at the end of Stephens-Lee or at the end of South French Broad and I read where Dr. Lennon took a job, I think, at Spelman.

RBN: I'm not sure Doc Lennon ( ). Because music was his essence really.

ZR: Any fellow students come to mind that you were close to?

RBN: Deborah. Regina who organized this. And so many students and I think so many of us left either immediately after school to shortly thereafter in different roles, college, work, military, that I lost contact with them. I was so surprised that there were names that ( ).

ZR: Great. Thank you so much.

RBN: You're more than welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW.